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SUBJECT: LATVIA/RUSSIA: LAVROV TO RIGA? AND
INTERGOVERNMENTAL COMMISSION

Classified By: Ambassador Catherine Todd Bailey. Reason: 1.4 (D)

11. (C) Summary: Russian FM Lavrov has proposed coming to Riga September 17 to exchange instruments of ratification on the Latvia-Russia border treaty. The GOL is cautiously agreeing to this, although it could lead to public protests if the constitutional court has not yet ruled on the treaty's validity by that time. The recent Latvia-Russia intergovernmental commission was most notable for the fact it happened, rather than any concrete results. The Latvians feel there is an added pragmatism to the relationship, but remain cautious, knowing that Moscow's mood could change at any moment. End summary.

12. (C) Ambassador Bailey met with FM Pabriks August 3 and Pabriks confirmed what we have been hearing -- that he had spoken to Russian FM Lavrov on July 31 about the border treaty and Lavrov was willing to come to Riga September 17 to exchange instruments of ratification on the treaty. (Note: The Russian Duma has yet to vote on the treaty, but the Russians tell GOL that this will happen early in September. End note.) Pabriks said that if the visit comes before the Latvian Constitutional Court rules on the constitutionality of the treaty, there could be some political protests, but he was prepared for that. Separately, we have heard that the GOL is pushing the Court to advance the date for its initial ruling on the treaty, currently rumored for September 28.

13. (C) The previous day, MFA U/S Skuja had previewed this development to A/DCM in a meeting. Skuja said that it was remarkable that when Pabriks tried to call Lavrov, he was able to get the call in under 30 minutes when it usually takes days. Additionally, when Lavrov offered to come to Riga and Pabriks suggested dates, the Russian MFA confirmed the Sep. 17 date in under an hour. Skuja said he felt that "higher level political forces" had already been at work on this. Skuja added, though, that because the Duma had yet to act and because of the track record with Moscow, the GOL would not announce the visit until much closer to the date, although he expected Russian Ambassador to Latvia Viktor Kahluzhny to leak it within days.

14. (C) Skuja also briefed on the Latvia-Russia intergovernmental commission meeting held July 20 in Riga. He said that the most important aspect was that it happened at all, after years of negotiating to get the commission established (finally agreed last October) and months of perceived Russian foot dragging on setting a date for the first meeting. He said that the meeting had two principle concrete outcomes: agreement by the Russian side to move forward on completing a treaty on double taxation (which Skuja cautiously hoped might even be signed during a Lavrov visit) and agreement to create a new subgroup of the commission to deal with border crossings (there is currently a delay of several days for trucks to cross the border into Russia).

15. (C) While describing the meeting as business like and constructive, Skuja said that the Russians continue to raise several difficult issues. In particular, they want to open a Russian cultural and information center in Riga, they want access to tenders for the Latvian state energy company's projects on terms equal to EU member states, and they want to amend a 1994 agreement with Latvia on protection of Soviet war graves to also include protection of Soviet war memorials. Skuja said all of these are non-starters for the Latvian side. The next meeting of the full commission would likely be early in 2008, although the various working and sub groups would continue to meet before then and Skuja hoped that it might be possible to focus on more achievable outcomes.

16. (C) Comment: It is never easy to explain why Russian-Latvian relations are as they are on a certain date or to predict what will happen in the future. The idea of a Lavrov visit came as a surprise to the Latvians, at least in terms of times and seeming Russian eagerness to make the visit, so they are cautious. They don't want to get the blame if it doesn't happen, and don't want egg on their face if they get too far out in front. Similarly, they are happy to have the structure of the intergovernmental commission, but are frustrated that the Russians don't want to address what the Latvians view as long standing problems like arrangements for people receiving pensions from both governments the continued difficulties in border crossings. But the Latvians know that they have to keep plugging away at the relationship and find practical areas of cooperation where possible.
BAILEY